

GEORGE M. HORTON, THE POET,

There came from among the slaves during the antislavery crusade in America two authors at least who gave the advocates of emancipation quite as much uneasiness for a while as they did the proslavery people. These slaves were, the one an orator, and the other a poet, and it was the very merit of their productions which proved as did the mighty strength of Sampson in the Temple, equally discomfiting to friend and foe. The power and cogency of their reasoning in setting forth the evils of slavery caused the slaveholders to tremble, while the general excellence of their work made antislavery men fear least the system of oppression under which such achievements could be produced might not after all look so bad as painted. Of the orator herein referred to enough has been said in its proper place elsewhere under the name of Frederick Douglass and there is no need of detaining the reader at this point. We shall therefore turn at once to the life and career of the other writer, who was George M. Horton, the North Carolina slave poet of long ago. The fates have spun out most miserly of their facts and incidents in the life of this humble songster of the pioneer days in North Carolina, and even of the little left us its fragmentary nature renders it not of the highest importance for pointing a moral or adorning a tale. We know neither his beginning nor his end.

George M. Horton, according to the Raleigh (N. C.) Register, was a young slave on the farm of Mr. James Horton, who lived in Chatham County about half-way between Chapel Hill and Wittersborough in North Carolina. At the first mentioning of his name in print about 1827 he was about twenty-five years of age. He was of a mild and humble disposition and deportment and with these attracting almost as much attention as by his poetic gifts. His productions early won him friends among the thoughtful even in the slave-state of North Carolina. The following account of his beginning and progress in learning was derived from George himself, and was communicated by a friend and gentleman well-known for his philanthropic feelings. George first learned the alphabet from hearing the school children rehearsing it. He then took the spelling-book and became acquainted with the form of the letters. Gratified with such employment, he was soon able to ~~spell~~ spell and read. At this period some person gave him a copy of Wesley's hymns with which he was delighted, beginning at once to spend most of his leisure hours in reading the book and while at work, endeavoring to make verses in imitation of it. Finding himself at a loss in properly constructing his verse, he next turned to the study of grammar and prosody. Being very intimate with the students of the university who had discovered his extraordinary genius, he delighted to visit them whenever a Sunday or a holiday permitted. He received from them a variety of poetis works, the reading of which constituted his greatest pleasure. They were in the habit of selecting topics upon which to exercise his poetic muse. The fol-

lowing Sunday he would return and have them transcribed. What was very astonishing, he had not only to make his verses but retain them in memory, until he could meet with some one to copy them; and although he might have three or four sets of verses, upon different subjects his memory was so attentive that he had no difficulty in recounting them in turn to his scribe. When an abbreviation was necessary to preserve the metre he would point out and insist upon its being made to his scribe. Horton had little or no pleasure in associating with any but those of intelligence and was always delighted when he could get an amanuensis to transcribe his verses. And for that purpose every Sunday he would walk eight or nine miles to visit the students of the college. (Freedom Journal Aug. 8, 1828, p 153)

The philanthropic gentleman above mentioned being on a visit to Chapel-Hill as one of the members of the Board for annual visitation at the college had some of Horton's poems put into his hands and their extraordinary merit struck him so forcibly as to enlist at once the sympathy of the philanthropist in the slave's behalf. (See F. J. page 179)

Notice about the poet and his work came to the editors of Freedom's Journal in New York, who at once opened up a subscription for the purchase money for Horton on Sept. 12, 1828, hoping "the interesting case of the young man will be remembered by our readers."

It was through the kindness of the above philanthropist whose name now seems lost to posterity, that an effort was made to redeem Horton from slavery. We got together the facts in the Poet's life, and many of his poems, and published them in the Raleigh Register. We sent them also to some of the Northern papers particularly of New England and of New York, where it was hoped that their ability would win friends for the poet. Freedom's Journal, John B. Russworm's paper which was one of the publications to which they were sent, undertook the agency at New York for raising the Horton purchase-fund, (Freedom Journal Sept. 12, 1828) and published the facts of his life and several of his poems, between August and October of 1828. It felt assured that when the facts in the interesting case of the young man were once got before the public, money would be forth coming; for "were each person of color in this city to give but a penny, there would be no danger about obtaining his liberty." This paper announced with some pride on the 3rd of October, the name of David Walker of Boston as a generous subscriber to the fund and hoped that other New Englanders would follow his lead. But probably this plan of liberation proved unsuccessful. Another method of effecting Horton's freedom was thought to be more feasible in collecting and publishing his poems in book form. The friends and publishers of the work declared themselves as "soliciting that efforts at length be made to obtain by subscription a sum sufficient for his emancipation upon the condition of his going in the vessel which shall first after-

wards sail for Liberia." Upon these conditions the little book was published with the following title: "The Hope of Liberty, containing a number of poetical pieces. By George M. Horton, Raleigh, printed by Gales and Son, 1829." Weston R. Gales who thus put forth this little volume did not desire to be known as an abolitionist though he admitted slavery to be the "lowest possible condition of human nature." From the explanatory introduction to the work, we learn that James Horton, the owner, knew nothing of George's poetical gifts except as he heard of them through others, and that George was then trying to learn the art of writing for himself. It is understood that sufficient money was not realized through the sale of the book to effect Horton's liberty and that the master was too poor or ignorant (or perhaps both) to be moved by any consideration but an exorbitant price for the release of George.

Gales who later on became a partner in the printer's firm of Gales and Seaton at Washington, added some further information about a slave poet, which came by way of a letter from Joshua Coffin the old time Newbury antislavery worker, while on a visit to Washington. He wrote thus to Isaac Knapp, of Boston in 1837:

Washington, Sept. 12, 1837.

Dear Sir:-

I have inquired of Mr. Gales agreeable to your request to ascertain the present condition of George M. Horton. He informs me that he is still the slave of James Horton of Chatham County and is employed as a servant at Chapel Hill, the seat of the University of North Carolina. It is understood by Mr. Gales that he did not derive much pecuniary profit from the publication of his poems; and that since the death of his patron, the late Dr. Caldwell, President of the University, he has attended to other occupations. I am

Yours truly,

Joshua Coffin.

This letter was published in 1838, as part of the preface to the Knapp edition, which was the second and last publication of Horton's poems. To say the truth this Knapp edition, known simply as "poems by a slave", was put forth as a part of a small volume containing the writings of Phillis Wheatley, and not as a regular, independent edition. Yet we have the editor's assurance that "the pamphlet is republished without any alterations even verbal except the insertion of the headline "Poems by a slave", and the omission of the title of the first edition already mentioned above." The poems in this second edition constituted about all the works of Horton, though the compiler of the first collection tells us that "many more might have been added which would have swelled the work into a larger size." We ourselves have picked up one or two not included in the collection. The President of the University of North Carolina mentioned as being the

patron of the slave poet was Dr. John Caldwell who was a professor, or President of that institution for well nigh a generation. It was fortunate for George M. Horton then that failing to get his freedom, he found such a distinguished patron; for if it is decreed that a soul like his touched to finer issues, must pass his days in endless slavery, surely to pass them amid a fellowship with students and scholars, humble though it be, would be the nearest approach to freedom. Horton was far past middle life at the death of his distinguished patron, and as he never obtained his freedom, he probably continued as a man of all sorts about the University, though no one not even the President there at this time seems able to recall any traditions in connection with the slave poet. Thus amid the academic grove about Chapel Hill did Horton see his latter days go down the vale of years choosing ever and anon the moments with a serious song. With every hope for freedom gone, he yet occasionally found solace in poetry like Ovid in exile when he sang:

If faults and defects should my lines deface,
 Dear friend, excuse; be mindful of the place.
 Here banished, I for ease, not glory write
 To keep my mind from dwelling on my plight.
 So sings the miner chained in fetters strong
 To ease his irksome toil with rustic song;
 And tow-path-men that drag with bended side
 Their overlade^d boats against stream and tide,
 While oarsmen seated on their banks, in prime,
 Cut, the smooth waters stroked to measured time.
 The shepherd too, oft, sitting on a rock,
 With pipe and voice delights his fleecy flock.
 And handmaids spinning at the wheel find cheer,
 With song amid allotted labors drear.
 Achillis, reft of the Lyrnession maid,
 Drowned all his sorrows on the lyre he played;
 While for his lost spouse, Orpheus' harp of love
 Caused trees to wave, and stolid rocks to move.
 We, too, the muse oft comforts with a rhyme,
 In Pontus here - sole comrade in this clime;
 For she alone continues to abide:
 Nor man's deceit war's tumultuous din,
 Nor storm, or ocean's roar, or rabble's grin,
 Or aught whate'er can drive her from my side.

Of Horton's poems it might as well be said here that while not the most finished, they are the best lyrical productions by any colored author who has yet appeared. Redolent of the fresh young life of a pioneer community, they breathe everywhere that spontaneity in sentiment, that variety and copiousness in images which is nature's gift to her most highly endowed songsters.

George M. Horton may well be called the Robert Burns of the colored race. Like Burns, he could give with unrivalled felicity a voice to the passion of love,) - could touch almost to living reality the impressions seen and felt in the daily routine of life about him. Indeed there is still further resemblance in the careers of these two poets. Like the "Kilmarnock Edition" the first collected works of Burns, which was published to pay the poet's way to a home in the Island of Jamaica, Horton's poems were first issued for the purpose of getting him out of the country to Liberia and as the desired end in the case of the former was never realized through a lack of sales of his books, failure in the case of the other was brought about through a similar cause. Like Burns also Horton seems to have ended life in about the same condition as he began it, after having experienced in the meanwhile a somewhat better fortune.